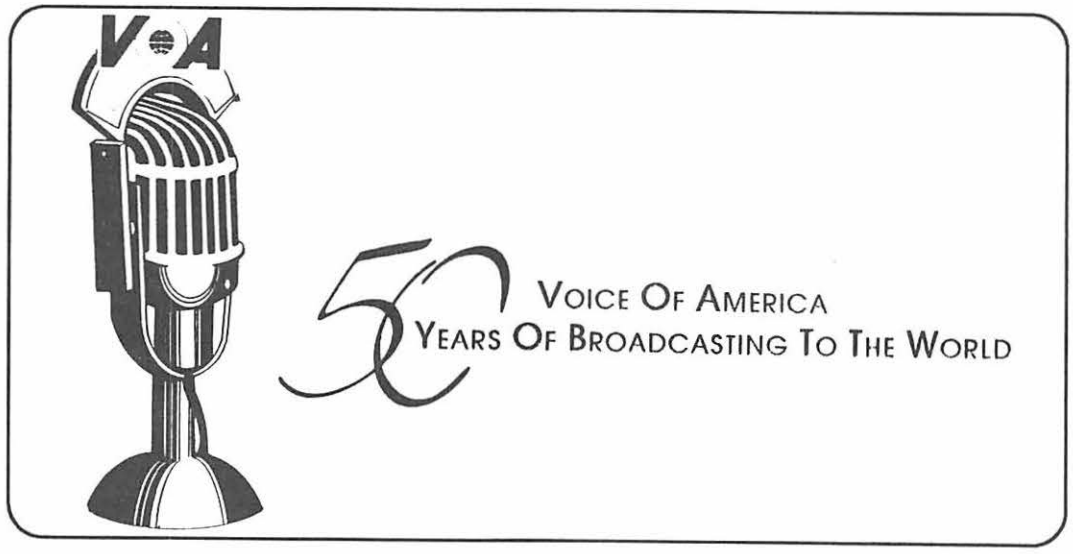


The VOA at 50

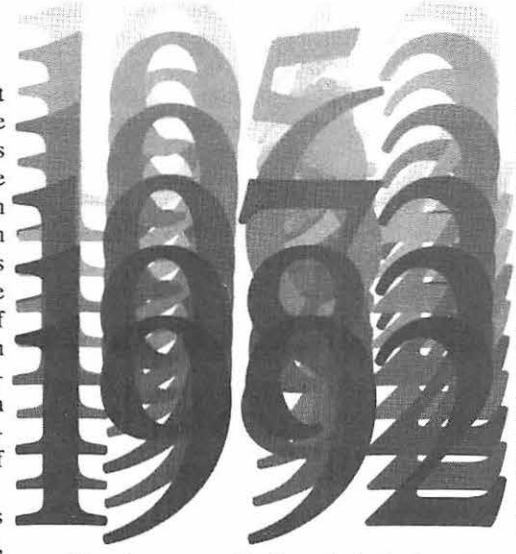
A Year of Celebration and Change

By Jeff Chanowitz

On February 24, with past and present directors of the VOA in attendance and red, white, and blue banners covering its headquarters, Dante Fascell, the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, addressed an audience of VOA employees and journalists. In his address, Fascell stated, "The last fifty years have been good. You (VOA employees) have done an excellent job and the country is proud of you...but we have got to look to the future with even greater optimism and with greater challenges." Yet, as the Voice of America's 50th anniversary marks a year of celebration, changing world events have also made 1992 a year of uncertainty.

From its headquarters located a few blocks from the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, DC, the VOA has broadcast the news and views of America to the world since 1942. As early as 1941, the United States' shortwave broadcasting resources consisted of just over a dozen low-powered, commercially owned and operated transmitters. Then, shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Franklin Roosevelt established the Foreign Information Agency. On February 24th, the first broadcast was beamed to Europe via the BBC on medium and longwave transmitters.

The announcer, William Harlan Hale, opened the German language broadcast with the words, "Here speaks a voice from America." The name took hold and the FIA became known as the Voice of America.



Despite a troubled period during the McCarthy era of the early 1950s, the VOA has continued to expand its world coverage and news reputation with a primary focus on delivering its message through the Iron Curtain. In the 60s and 70s, the VOA expanded its programming to include the Third World.

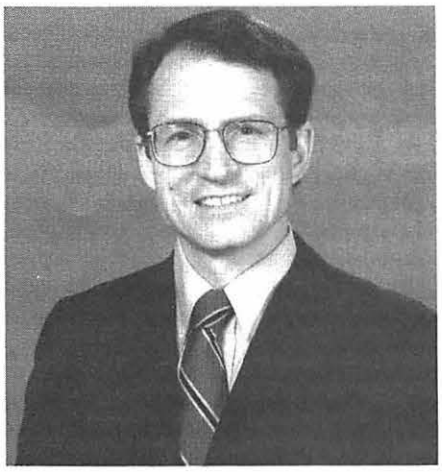
Today, the VOA has emerged as a major international service with broadcasts in 44 different languages and a worldwide network of 26 news bureaus. In addition, with transmitters and relay stations located in Botswana, Costa Rica, Germany, Greece, Morocco, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and the United States, VOA has established a global audience that is estimated to number in the hundreds of millions.

Despite airing US government editorials, the service continues to abide by its 1976 charter which mandates "accurate, objective and comprehensive" news coverage. Yet, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the ending of the Cold War has resulted in the Voice of America's future role being questioned by some government officials in Washington, DC.

Chase Untermeyer, the current director of the VOA, refuted this perception stating, "The VOA was never intended to be an anti-communist tool and symbol of capitalism against the Soviet Union." He added, "The VOA started out to tell the truth, which was not being done out of Berlin and Tokyo at that time. It was not anti-communist, but presented enough material for listeners to make a judgment."

The Changing Face of the VOA

In response to the developments in the former Soviet Union, President Bush established a Task Force on US Government International Broadcasting. Its purpose was to evaluate the US government's current role in international broadcasting and make recommendations for the future direction of such organizations as the VOA. In December, the task force concluded its report recommending that the VOA become a more "global" service. In addition, the task force suggested that there should be a reexamination of the languages that the VOA broadcasts.



Chase Untermeyer, current director of the VOA.

Untermeyer disagreed with some of the task force's findings stating, "If we are not global, it is because we don't by law, broadcast to the US and don't aim at Australia and New Zealand." Yet, he does admit that the VOA will place increased emphasis on programming for the Third World in the future. Also, because of the changing world situation, which makes predicting future programming needs almost impossible, Untermeyer also disagreed with the report's other recommendation commenting, "Unless ordered to, I will not reassess the languages we broadcast."

For Frank Shkreli, Deputy Chief of VOA's Eurasian division, the changes in the former Soviet Union have made a direct impact. Shkreli commented, "The structure of the programming has changed in the sense that shows are faster moving and our programs are livelier." He added, "Because all of our directors have been to the region to which they broadcast, we now have a better sense of what the audience wants."

Today, many local, independent stations have gone on the air in Russia and in the former Soviet Republics. This has caused increased competition for listeners. Not wanting to lose their audience, the VOA is responding by providing innovative programming such as "Radio Bridges," which are panel discussions on topics by two groups of people in two different countries linked via satellite or by phone lines, and informative "How-To" programs that present information on topics ranging from starting a business to opening a stock market.

Shkreli stated, "For the past fifty years, people were told what to do by the center in the Soviet Union. Today, people need information about capitalism...In that area, we have an important role."

In addition to programming changes, the VOA has recently placed a correspondent in Russia and is also airing programming and news on 18 radio stations throughout the Eurasian region including the following shortwave broadcasters: Radio EKHO (Moscow, Russia), All Russian State Radio, Gostelradio (Tibilisi, Georgia), Radio Baltica (St. Petersburg, Russia) and Radio Vladivostok (Vladivostok, Russia).

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Chanowitz

The exterior of the VOA building is decorated for the 50th anniversary celebration.

"Thank you Voice of America for the correct information."

Graffiti found on the wall of the Moscow White House facing the American Embassy after the August 1991 coup attempt in Moscow. The translation reads: ***"Thank you Voice of America for the correct information."***

Yet, the true impact of fifty years of VOA programming is exemplified by those who listen. One long-time listener is Vaslev Havel, the famous playwright/dissident and current president of the Czech and Slovak republic. On his first visit to the United States, Havel requested to see the VOA's studios asking, "to say hello to those guys and ladies who I have been listening to for so many years." Polish President, Lech Walesa, was also a listener and described foreign broadcasts to Poland as the "sun in the midst of darkness."

Today, VOA's impact is felt in countries like Albania. While on a visit to the long-isolated Balkan nation, Frank Shkreli commented, "It was unbelievable! Everybody you talk to was a VOA listener." He added, "These people were very knowledgeable about world events thanks to the VOA."

Loyal listeners can thank the under-rated and hard working employees of the VOA for the hundreds of hours of fair, accurate and interesting news programs broadcast each week. With past professions ranging from taxi driver to university professor, VOA employees are as diverse as the programming and languages they broadcast.

To qualify for a foreign broadcaster position at the VOA, a person must possess native fluency in a foreign language, proficiency in English and a background that includes public speaking or broadcasting. Yet, despite difficulties which include adjusting to life in Washington, DC, and obtaining visas for family members, VOA broadcasters have established a track record of excellence. The professionalism of VOA's employees is exemplified by Zamira Islami, who works in the Albanian service. During the reign of the brutal communist dictatorship in Albania, she risked reprisals against family members in order to broadcast the truth.

Another Albanian broadcaster is Inia Therecka. He spent the last 25 years in a labor camp serving a sentence on trumped-up charges of crimes against the state. In 1989, Therecka escaped from Albania and managed to get to the United States. In 1992, Therecka was hired as an announcer. He is very happy at his new job because he also used to "listen to the VOA's wonderful voice of freedom in Albania."

Such brave and determined people are not uncommon at the VOA. Without doubt, it has been the dedication of correspondents, broadcasters and support staff who have made the VOA's 50th anniversary truly special.

Budget Constraints

With continued US budget deficits, the VOA has felt the sting of cutbacks. In the past, financial constraints have caused the VOA to close news bureaus in Mexico City, Boston and Houston. Also, budget shortfalls have temporarily caused the VOA to stop responding to the million pieces of mail it receives each year. Even VOA's extensive coverage of the Persian Gulf War required the passing of a special supplementary budget by the US Congress. Despite feeling the pinch of cuts, Untermeyer remains optimistic commenting, "In an era when many agencies of the US government are retrenching, we are actually expanding."

Yet, the VOA budget is extremely vulnerable. The station receives no direct funding but must rely on the United States Information Agency to allocate funds for its budget. Untermeyer admitted that this puts the VOA in a precarious position financially, similar to "living on the edge of two knives." For the future, it's hoped that the budget process can be reformed and that VOA's funding will be allocated directly from Congress.

VOA at 50

As part of the 50th Anniversary celebration, the VOA is holding a listener's contest that will award over 10,000 prizes, including T-shirts, shortwave radios and eight trips for two to Washington, DC, and Disney World. SWLs and hams can also receive a special 50th anniversary QSL and certificate by listening to the VOA's amateur club stations, which include K3EKAVOA in Washington, DC, DX2VOA in the Philippines and V31VOA in Belize. If you can visit Washington, DC, the VOA will have a special exhibit of photographs and memorabilia highlighting the VOA's 50 years of broadcasting to the world.

If you can't travel to the Nation's capitol, many relay stations around the world will host a variety of events to celebrate the anniversary. In addition, the VOA has commissioned a television documentary, called "Some of Our Yesterdays," which recounts the story of the VOA in the words of famous people such as Mikhail Gorbachev, President Bush and John Houseman, who was the VOA's first director.

For details about the 50th Anniversary celebrations, listen to the VOA or write to: VOA 50th Anniversary Office, Room 1541, 320 Independence Ave. SW, Washington, DC 20547.

For those who wonder about VOA's commitment to shortwave broadcasting, Untermeyer removed all doubts, stating strongly, "While it's clear that in the early 21st century there will be other forms of broadcasting, there also will be a place for shortwave...if only because it's the only way to reach many countries that are denied access to information." Shkreli also added what shortwave listeners have known for a long time, "We will never get rid of shortwave. It has made us what we are today!"

As the world enjoys a period in which national borders have opened up and information is flowing more freely than at any time in history, many critics discount the need for services like the VOA. Untermeyer responds to these nay sayers, "There are still places that are denied access to free information, such as China and Cuba...and many countries, such as the Soviet Union, may backslide from democracy."

In the event that new dictatorships emerge, listeners can be assured that the VOA will continue to provide truthful and uncensored information about the United States and the world as it has done during the last fifty years.

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The VOA newsroom staff produces an average of 180 stories each day.

VOA's broadcasting studios.

VOA's Albanian service with Inia Thercka, center, and Zamira Islami, right.